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ABSTRACT

Students in New Zealand and several other countries were tested in writing skills near the end of their formal (secondary) education, as part of the International Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) tests. Among the categories tested were functional letter writing and narrative, persuasive, and reflective essay writing. New Zealand student performances over all the functional letter tasks demonstrated that the highest scoring responses showed considerable written language skills. In the narrative essay tasks, the competent writers were characterized by control of narrative form and style, ability to generate and select appropriate content, successful handling of chronology, awareness of the reader, and understanding that one purpose of this task was to entertain. Students who drew on personal experiences produced lively, fresh essays. The argumentative essay task asked the writers to organize material systematically, and in this task less able writers sometimes penalized themselves by selecting subjects with limited breadth of content. The most academic task, the reflective essay, suggested that not many students possessed the maturity of reasoning or broad general knowledge necessary to distance themselves from strident argument or personal anecdote. Scores showed that student writing performance varied substantially across each dimension depending on the student's familiarity with the task. Accuracy in the mechanics of spelling and writing were also task specific and linked to student confidence in responding to each task. (An inter-task correlation table and references are appended.) (MKA)

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SYMPOSUM ON IEA STUDY OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION:

STUDENT PERFORMANCE ACROSS THE DOMAIN OF

SCHOOL WRITING

ED286194

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Student Performance Across the Domain of Writing

This paper focuses on the crunch issue - consumer reaction - how students responded to the carefully devised, revised, pre-tested tasks, bearing in mind what we have heard of teacher practices and student perceptions of writing in schools.

To some extent these responses depended on where the students were sitting - the cultural context of their home and school environments, a setting which must also take into account the age range of Population B, (students at or near the end of compulsory education) of 14 to 18 years, across the equivalents of grades 8 to 11.

The cultural context was apparent in responses to the functional letter tasks. For students in some of the participating countries, these were not familiar everyday messages. For example, Chilean and Thai students rarely have the experience of applying in writing for a summer holiday job. It would be highly unlikely for an Italian student to write an excuse note to the school principal. In Indonesia the situation of leaving a note to family members because no-one was at home when the student returned from school was unrealistic.

However, some generalisations on performance can be made. These are descriptive and qualitative rather than quantitative at this stage until all national results are published, and are based on comments from the international jury on sample scripts from participating countries, and from those national reports available at the time of writing: New Zealand, the Netherlands, England and Wales.

In Tasks 1A, 1B and 9, the friendly letters, the best writers combined a fluent command of the required familial or friendly tone with descriptive ability and precise language choice. Lower scoring scripts were characterised by intrusive irrelevant material (especially biographical detail in the letter of self-description), or by vague and partial information, and pedestrian use of language.

Whereas in Task 1A the content was given through the set of line-drawings of bicycles which accompanied the test booklet, in both Tasks 1B and 9, some degree of independent thought, and recall and selection of content was required. This content then had to be assembled into an ordered sequence. Such a sense of order was missing in low scoring scripts, where ideas were jumbled and incoherent.

The variation in styles and content in these tasks was a further example of cultural difference, and may reflect the influences of the home or peer group, or of social class more than school influences.

The clear content requirements of Tasks 1C and 1E, the formal letters, led to fewer problems for students. Content scores in the Netherlands were high in this task, as in all the functional tasks. The English report states that their students found it relatively easy to deal with the content and form of Task 1C, the letter to the principal, and that this task was within the competence of most pupils. In New Zealand, this was the top-scoring task for Population B students. It may be that students were better able to visualise their principal as the specific audience for the letter, with the result that a formal, courteous style and tone was observed. It was a feature of low-scoring scripts that an inappropriately colloquial informal tone was used. This informal register was also seen in scripts by Population A students in New Zealand (12 year olds), but whether this was a lack of familiarity with the conventions of formal messages or a function of their principal's image as an approachable friendly adult is not clear.

In contrast, some students found it more difficult to imagine the audience and the recipient's point of view in the application for a summer job, where the audience was an unknown personnel manager. In the English sample, this task created problems for a large number of students. Some found the level of formality difficult, so that a serious and distant tone at times became pompous or clumsy.

Student performance over all five functional letter tasks demonstrated that the highest scoring responses showed

considerable written language skills. They were coherent, informative, with a fluent command of styles. Low scoring scripts showed problems in the selection of relevant detail, a random ordering of information, inappropriate or unvaried language choice, and a lack of control of style and tone.

The narrative task asked students to write on an episode that could have happened to them, based on a choice of seven options. It appeared that in this task in particular the dimensions of content, organisation and style were closely interdependent. Competent writers were characterised by their control of narrative form and style, the ability to generate and select appropriate content, successful handling of the chronology of the episode, in their awareness of the reader, and their understanding that one purpose of this task was to entertain.

Students who drew on their own experience produced lively, fresh essays. They conveyed a frankness in succeeding at last, doing something good or realising a dream, an often painful personal growth and self-analysis in making a hard decision or understanding how the other person feels. The better narratives showed an honesty of perception, a freshness of voice and sometimes a sense of humour. Such features were usually lacking in plots culled from television programmes, comics, films or popular teenage fiction. The titles "My Dream Became Real" and "My Most Frightening Experience" appeared in the New Zealand sample

to encourage derivative content more frequently than did other titles.

The difference between high and low achieving writers was apparent in the sense of audience. Although the audience for the narrative was an unspecific 'reader' (unlike the functional letter tasks), better writers showed an understanding that for every story-teller there is a listener. They used many techniques to involve and manipulate the reactions of the reader: deliberate constructions for denouement, surprise endings, delayed action, conversation and internal monologue, the colloquial style of a raconteur, deliberately heightened and expressive vocabulary, variation in sentence structures. Introductions showed varying degrees of sophistication, and often dictated the structure and tone which followed. The most common opening in the New Zealand sample was a descriptive paragraph, the establishment shot common in film, as a physical, emotional or historical context for the story. There was also evidence in introductions (and conclusions) of what Moffet[1] called 'decentring', reflection on the episode, and distancing in the adjustment the writer made to the point of view of the audience. Other opening strategies included varied chronology, such as flashbacks, the narrative framework of a story within a story, immediate action often using dialogue, and even the occasional classical technique of beginning 'in media res'.

Not all experimentation was entirely successful. Weaknesses in planning led some students to emphasise the detailed chronology of the episode, concentrating on what happened rather than how it happened. The result was a rather flat catalogue of events, without highlight or emphasis. Others seemed reluctant to reject irrelevant content, especially in introductory material, so that, after a long and time-consuming list of domestic detail or minor events, the heart of the story was added hurriedly at the end. This may arise when students have to write to a set word length. In some cases, stories were incomplete where time, energy or interest had run out. The converse was true for some lower-achieving students in the New Zealand sample who chose option 5, "I Met a New Friend". Having met the new friend early in the narrative, these writers found little else to say.

In the English sample, Option 2, "I Succeeded at Last", and Option 6, "My Most Frightening Experience" were higher scoring titles than the others. In New Zealand, " My Most Frightening Experience" was the most popular choice, but higher scores were more frequent in Option 1, "I Made a Hard Decision" and Option 7, "I Learned to Know How the Other Person Feels".

This task was the highest scoring essay type task in New Zealand for Population B, although the formal letters proved least difficult overall. The Netherlands' report [2] comments that real quality was rare in the stories. For the

English sample, the narrative was the least difficult task, but the authors of the national report also wrote [3]: "Pupils are more adept at writing stories than other tasks, but few are so skilled as to produce flawless work particularly with respect to the control exercised over aspects of the style of writing."

Task 6, the persuasive or argumentative essay asked students to write on any problem or issue about which they felt strongly. The writer was required to generate content, including illustrations or incidents as supporting material, and to organise this material logically and systematically in order to persuade the audience to share that point of view. The stance could be adversarial, or a balanced perspective.

The choice of problem was wide-ranging, from ego-centric concerns to global issues. Some of those who wrote on general ethical problems had little to say beyond half-understood, regurgitated views, but mature writers with a genuine interest in the topic usually produced high-scoring scripts. Not all high scores were on these wider topics; some on personal and family problems were equally high.

The use of minor issues sometimes led to problems in generating enough material. Denouncing a school rule against eating sweets in class might produce a lively argument from an Alan Coren or a Richard Benchley: ("The Ingestion of Sweetmeats During the Hours Set Aside for

Study", perhaps), but less able writers penalised themselves by selecting subjects with limited breadth of content.

Depth of feeling and seriousness were not necessarily indicators of high achievement. Vehement style could become a tirade, lacking in logic and, at least in New Zealand, depending on peremptory rhetorical questions and insistent statements. A balance between forthright views and persuasive style was difficult to maintain, and the registers shifted from formal to colloquial. In these essays, a bald description of a problem, or the blunt declaration that there was a problem replaced argumentation, logic or persuasion. Repetition or even listing of ideas were substitutes for emphasis or supporting arguments, links between ideas were tenuous. Limited language choice and sentence structures reflected the vague or limited ideas, and the spoken mode was intrusive.

Those who were confident in this genre knew their topic, and pleaded their case. They defined the issues, took a clear stance, recognised and rebutted counter arguments. Their framework for persuasion varied from the traditional rhetorical style to include narrative of a relevant incident, or a formal debating style.

The reflective essay, Task 7, was the most academic and the most difficult of all the tasks. The essay as a literary form is a process by which writers clarify their thinking. At its best it may offer new perceptions and understandings through association, comparison, evaluation and exposition. It involves the writer in a subtle balancing act of sustaining a personal view while acknowledging the opinions of others. The focus is on the topic, rather than the writer or the reader.

In this study students were asked to philosophise a little on a topic chosen from six areas of broad human concern. These ranged from the relatively familiar such as television, or the generation gap, to the more abstract, such as loneliness or the power of possessions.

Not many students at this level had the maturity of reasoning or broad general knowledge necessary to distance themselves from strident argument or mere personal anecdote. High quality scripts stated a clear position, drew inferences, and acknowledged implications of or alternatives to such a postion. They were rewarded for developing reasoning and analysis to support their stance, for clear and varied structures of organisation, especially transitions, introductions and conclusions, for a range of sentence structures, and for concise and often original expression.

In low-scoring scripts the wider perspectives suggested by the topics were usually not recognised. Argumentation took the form of simple personal statements unsupported by examples, or of stereotypes or irrelevant digressions. For instance, the content of low-scoring New Zealand essays on the television topic sometimes contained little more than a catalogue of favourite programmes. This apparent inability to read beyond the literal meaning of the starter material, and the lack of logic and reasoning suggests that these students had problems in responding at the cognitive level of analytical processing required by the task. In New Zealand, students at Population B level would not have been very familiar with this type of writing.

Students in this group also failed to perceive the need for a different style and tone from the argumentative/persuasive (Task 6), and sometimes used oratorical or spoken forms of expression.

Student performance across tasks and dimensions can be examined by looking at correlations between scores. In the New Zealand Population B sample, correlations for each dimension of writing were high <u>within</u> tasks, of the order of 0.8, but lower between tasks, of the order of 0.3. (See Appendix: 1 Inter-Task Correlations). These lower inter-task correlations will be partly due to rater differences in consistency of marking, but point to the likelihood that student writing performance varies substantially across each dimension depending on how familiar the student is with the

task, and how comfortable they feel in responding to it. Analyses in New Zealand for example, point to the importance of content accessibility for high performance on other dimensions. Accuracy in the mechanics of spelling, grammar and usage were seen to be task specific, and linked to the students' confidence in responding to each task.

The strongest set of correlations was between Tasks 1E and 7, the application for a summer job and the reflective essay. Both tasks had a referential purpose - to inform, and despite more specific suggestions in IE for the parameters of content, both involved the writer in generating relevant content.

More obvious similarities lay in the requirement to integrate ideas into structures which were logically organised, in the formality of style and tone, and in the audience being unknown in both tasks.

The weakest sets of correlations were found between Tasks 1B and 6, the letter of self-description and the argumentative essay. These two tasks differed from each other in purpose (1B was informational, 6 persuasive), in organisation (1B was spatial, 6 logical) in their orientation towards topic or reader, and in the specificity of the audience.

Similarly weak correlations were also seen between Tasks 1A and 5, the letter describing a bicycle, and the narrative essay. Again there were differences in purpose,

organisation, and topic or reader orientation. In short, each pair of tasks demanded that the writer operate at different cognitive levels in order to respond to the tasks.

Thus the domain in writing as delineated for this study did generate a range of tasks and criteria for scoring these tasks which were able to reveal variations in student performance across a number of systems of education.

International results will be able to flesh out this necessarily brief survey of student performance and point more clearly to patterns of performance, and reasons for these.

APPENDIX 1 **INTER-TASK CORRELATIONS BY DIMENSION: NEW ZEALAND POPULATION B**

		Task 5			Task 6			Task 7		
		CT	OR	ST	CT	OR	ST	CT	OR	ST
TASK										
1A	CT	-	-	-	.3	.3	.4	.3	.4	.4
	OR	-	-	-	.3	.3	.4	.25	.3	.3
	ST	(.2)	(.2)	(.2)	.3	.3	.4	.3	.3	.3
TASK										
1B	CT	(.2)	.3	.3	-	-	-	-	-	-
	OR	.3	.3	.3	-	-	-	.3	.3	.3
	ST	.3	.3	.3	-	-	-	.3	(.2)	.3
TASK										
1C	CT	-	.3	.3	-	(.2)	-	-	-	-
	OR	(.2)	.3	.3	(.2)	(.2)	-	(.2)	.3	.3
	ST	.3	.3	.3	(.2)	(.2)	(.2)	.3	.3	.3
TASK										
1E	CT	.3	.3	.3	.3	(.2)	.3	.3	.3	.3
	OR	.3	.3	.3	.3	(.2)	.3	.3	.4	.4
	ST	.3	.3	.3	.3	(.2)	.3	.4	.4	.4

NOTE: ( ) indicate significance p> 0.01.
Other figures show significance p> 0.001.

Footnotes:

1 Moffet, J. Teaching the Universe of Discourse, Boston, 1968.

2 de Glopper, K. Schrijfprestaties in het Voortgezet Onderwijs, (English summary), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 1985

3 Gubb, J, Gorman, T, and Price, E

The Study of Written Composition: A Report of the IEA Study of Written Composition in England and Wales, National Foundation for Educational Research, Slough, (in press), p 61.